

# The Role of Social Media in Shaping Consumer Behaviour and Brand Engagement Among Youth in Masvingo, Zimbabwe

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## Abstract

This study explored the role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour and brand engagement among the youth in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. Using a mixed-methods paradigm, the research combined quantitative data from 351 respondents and qualitative insights from 20 interviewees to examine how social media influences purchasing decisions, brand loyalty, and consumer attitudes. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across key demographic variables such as age, gender, and education level. Findings revealed that social media platforms, particularly WhatsApp, Facebook, and Instagram, played a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour, with 68% of the respondents acknowledging the direct influence of social media ads and influencer recommendations. Thematic analysis highlighted the importance of trust, authenticity, peer influence, and emotional connections with brands. Additionally, the study identified platform-specific behaviours and contextual factors, such as economic constraints and hybrid shopping preferences that shape consumer behaviour in Masvingo. The results underscored the transformative role of social media in driving brand loyalty and purchase decisions, offering valuable insights for marketers and businesses targeting youth in emerging markets.

**Key words:** Social Media, Consumer Behaviour, Brand Engagement, Youth, Masvingo

## Introduction

The rapid proliferation of social media platforms has fundamentally transformed the way consumers interact with brands, make purchasing decisions, and engage with products and services. Over the past decade, social media has evolved from a mere communication tool to a powerful marketing channel, influencing consumer behaviour and brand loyalty on a global scale (Ebrahim, 2019). This shift is particularly pronounced among youth, who are not only early adopters of digital technologies but also key drivers of consumer trends (Laricchia, 2024). In Zimbabwe, the increasing accessibility of affordable mobile internet and smartphones has accelerated social media adoption, with young people constituting the majority of users (Potraz, 2022). This digital transformation presents both opportunities and challenges for businesses seeking to connect with the youth market. There is limited empirical research on how social media shapes consumer behaviour and brand engagement in Zimbabwe despite the growing influence, particularly in medium sized urban centres such as Masvingo. This study seeks to address this gap by examining the role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour and brand engagement among Zimbabwean youth in Masvingo, offering localised insights that contribute to both academic discourse and practical business strategies.

The study has the potential to enhance understanding of the interplay between social media, consumer behaviour, and brand engagement in an emerging market context. Consumer behaviour, which encompasses the decision-making processes and actions of individuals when purchasing goods or services (Gupta & Chopra, 2020), is increasingly influenced by social media platforms. These platforms serve as spaces for information sharing, peer recommendations, and direct brand interactions, all of which shape purchasing decisions and brand perceptions (Dwivedi et al., 2021). In Zimbabwe, where traditional marketing channels are often constrained by resource limitations, social media offers a cost-effective and far-reaching alternative for businesses to connect with their target audiences (Muposhi & Dhurup, 2016). However, the extent to which these dynamics influence consumer behaviour and brand engagement among youth in Masvingo remains underexplored.

Past research has highlighted the growing influence of social media on consumer behaviour in African markets. Ndlovu and Sibanda (2022) found that social media platforms serve as primary information sources for 78% of urban Zimbabwean youth when making purchasing decisions. This trend is further supported by Nkosi (2024), who documented how social media engagement significantly impacts brand loyalty among young consumers in Southern Africa. The dynamic nature of social media platforms has created new paradigms in consumer-brand relationships, with Santiago (2024) noting that traditional marketing approaches are becoming less effective among youth demographics who prefer interactive, digital engagement.

Previous studies have predominantly focused on the impact of social media on consumer behaviour in developed economies or major urban centres in Africa, such as Harare and Bulawayo (Muposhi & Dhurup, 2016), overlooking the unique characteristics and challenges of secondary cities (Matamanda et al., 2022). While these studies provide valuable perceptions, they often overlook the unique socio-economic and cultural contexts of smaller urban centres. There remains therefore, a critical gap in understanding the specific mechanisms through which social media influences consumer behaviour in smaller urban centres such as Masvingo. Furthermore, the intersection of traditional consumer behaviour patterns with digital engagement strategies in these contexts remains understudied. This study builds on existing literature by exploring how social media influences purchasing decisions, brand loyalty, and consumer attitudes among youth in Masvingo, a city characterised by a growing youth population and increasing internet accessibility.

### **Research Methodology**

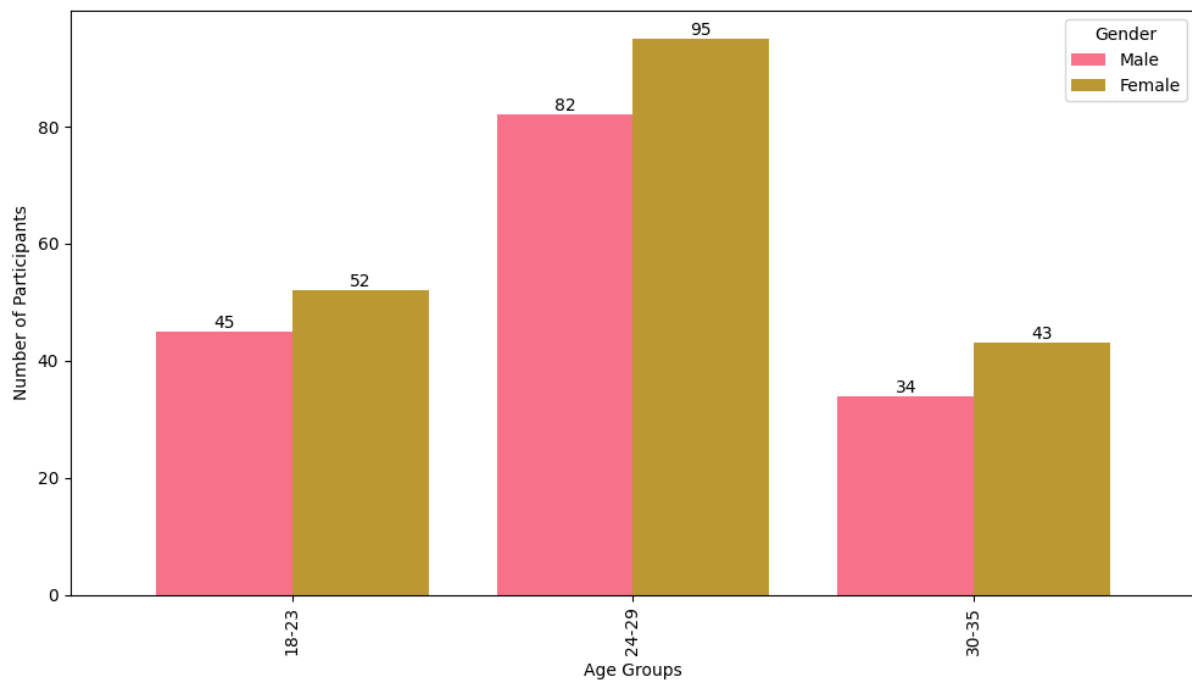
The target population for this study comprised of youth aged 18 to 35 in Masvingo, who are active users of social media platforms. A stratified random sampling technique was used to ensure representation across key demographic variables such as age, gender, and education level. For the quantitative phase, a sample size of 384 participants was determined using Cochran's formula for sample size calculation, ensuring a 95% confidence level and a 5% margin of error. For the qualitative phase, 20 participants were purposively selected based on their responses in the quantitative survey to provide in-depth insights.

### **Results and Discussion**

#### **Demographic Profile**

Out of 384 participants targeted, 351 responded to the study representing a response rate of 91.4%. The study had a gender distribution of 54% female and 46% male respondents. The mean age was 26.3 years (SD = 4.2), with 67% of participants having completed tertiary

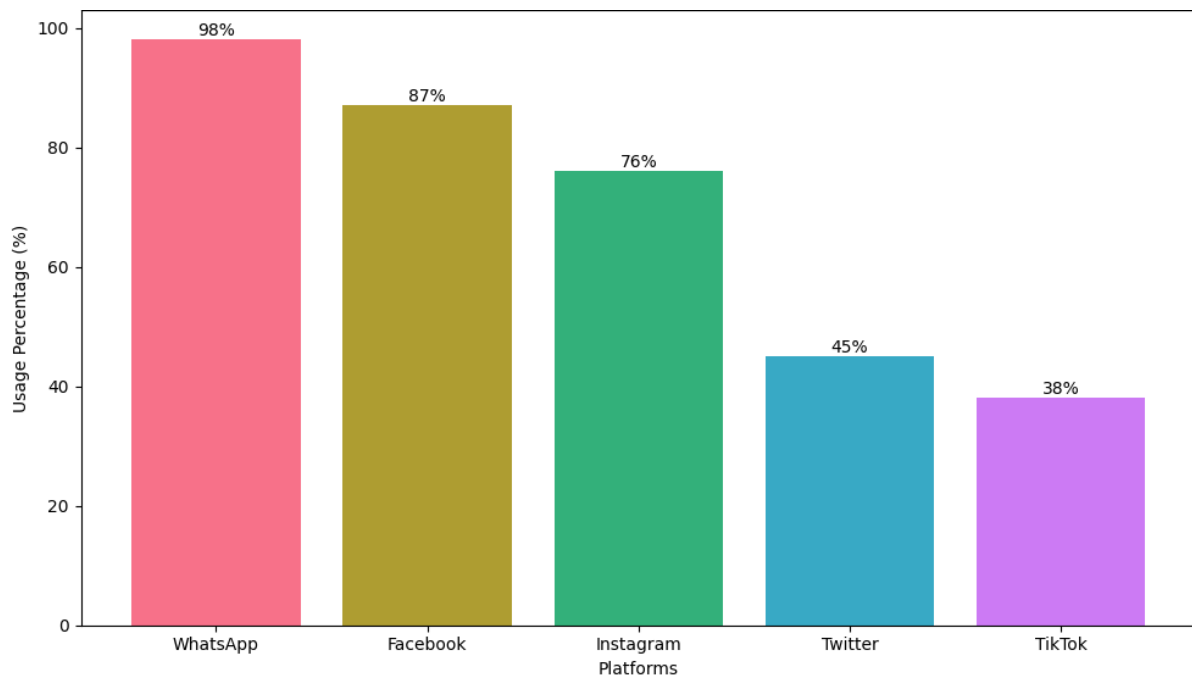
education. Most respondents (89%) reported daily social media usage exceeding 3 hours. Figure 1 shows the age and gender distribution of the participants.



*Figure 1: Age and gender distribution of participants*

### Social Media Usage Patterns

The quantitative analysis revealed that WhatsApp (98%), Facebook (87%), and Instagram (76%) were the most frequently used platforms as shown in Figure 2.



*Figure 2 Social media platform usage among participants*

### Social Media Influence on Purchasing Decisions

After performing Pearson's correlation analysis, a strong positive correlation was found between social media usage and purchasing decisions ( $r = 0.72$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ), indicating that as social media usage increases, the likelihood of social media influencing purchasing decisions also increases. This strong correlation suggests that social media platforms play a pivotal role in shaping consumer behaviour, particularly among the youth demographic studied. This result is consistent with Al-Mu'ani, et al (2023)'s observations that social media has a significant influence on consumer behaviour. This influence is clearly illustrated in Figure 3, which depicts the relative importance of social media, traditional media, and peer influence across five stages of the purchase decision journey.

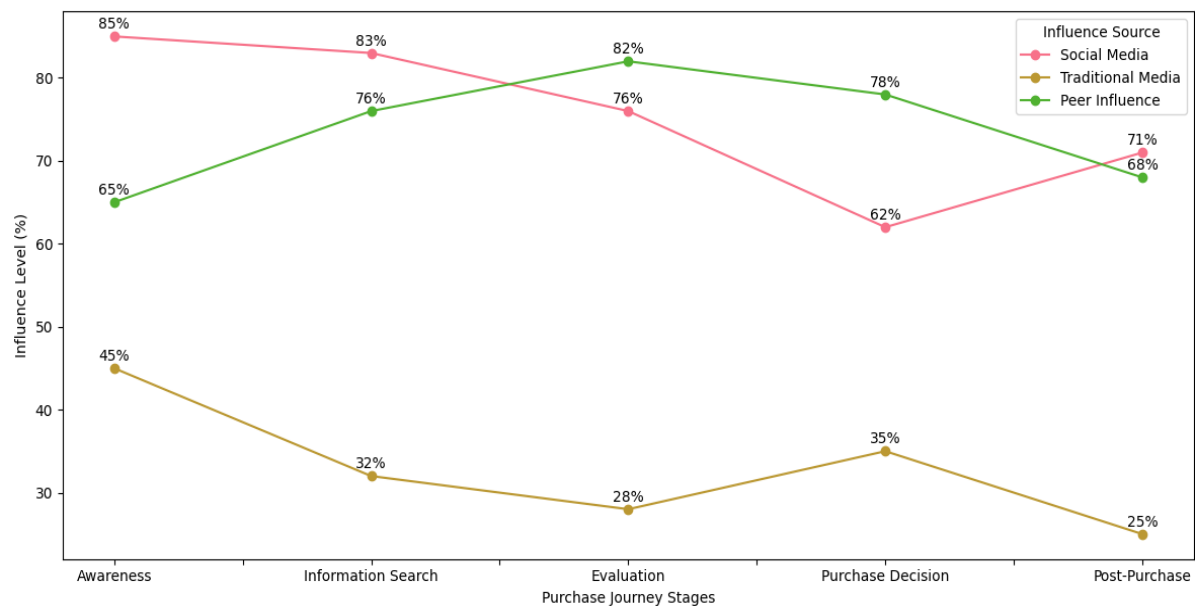


Figure 3: Influence factors across purchase journey

Further analysis of the data revealed that approximately 68% of respondents explicitly acknowledged that social media advertisements and influencer recommendations directly influenced their buying choices. This finding aligns with the strong correlation observed and mirrors Figure 3's depiction of social media's dominance, particularly in the early stages of the consumer journey. Social media exerts its strongest influence during the awareness and information search phases, with 85% and 83% influence levels respectively as the graph shows. This highlights the persuasive power of social media content in driving consumer behaviour, as respondents reported that visually appealing advertisements, relatable influencer endorsements, and targeted marketing campaigns on platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok significantly impacted their perceptions of products and brands. This is in line with what was postulated by Liu, X., & Zheng, X. (2024). Many participants noted that they often discovered new products or services through social media ads or influencer posts, which subsequently led to purchases. This suggests that social media serves not only as a platform for brand discovery but also as a key driver of consumer decision-making, a trend clearly visible in its high influence during the initial stages of the purchase process.

Social media's influence is strongest upfront, but its influence gradually decreases across the subsequent stages of evaluation, purchase decision, and post-purchase. Even with this decline, social media maintains the highest level of influence compared to traditional media and peer influence, underscoring its continued importance throughout the entire customer journey. Peer influence starts lower (65% at awareness) but steadily rises, peaking during the evaluation stage

(82%) and remaining strong through the purchase decision and post-purchase phases. This suggests that while social media might introduce consumers to products and provide initial information, peer recommendations and evaluations become increasingly crucial as they move closer to making a purchase. Traditional media, as the graph clearly demonstrates, has a consistently lower influence across all stages, declining steadily from 45% at awareness to just 25% post-purchase.

The influence of social media on purchasing decisions can be attributed to several factors. First, the interactive and engaging nature of social media content allows brands to create personalised and immersive experiences for consumers. Second, the credibility and relatability of influencers, particularly those who align with the values and interests of their followers, enhance the effectiveness of their recommendations. Third, the algorithmic targeting of advertisements ensures that users are exposed to products and services that align with their preferences and online behaviour, increasing the likelihood of conversion.

These results, viewed in conjunction with the graphical representation of media influence, have important implications for marketers and brands aiming to leverage social media for consumer engagement. The strong correlation between social media usage and purchasing decisions, coupled with the high percentage of respondents influenced by social media ads and recommendations, suggests that investing in targeted social media campaigns and influencer partnerships can yield significant returns. Additionally, the graph highlights the importance of a holistic approach, integrating social media strategies with an understanding of the rising importance of peer influence as consumers progress through the purchase journey. The declining, yet still present, role of traditional media suggests that a multi-channel approach, where traditional media complements digital strategies, may be most effective (Santiago, 2024). Overall, these findings highlight the transformative role of social media in shaping modern consumer behaviour and emphasise its potential as a powerful tool for driving brand loyalty and purchase decisions.

### **Qualitative Insights**

Thematic analysis of interview data revealed several interconnected patterns that shed light on how social media influences purchasing decisions, particularly within the context of Masvingo's digital consumer culture. These findings are discussed in the following section.

### **Trust and Authenticity**

A recurring theme throughout the interviews was the critical role of trust and authenticity in shaping consumer perceptions and brand loyalty. Participants emphasised the importance of brands being genuine and transparent in their social media presence. As one participant noted, *"I trust brands that show their real side on social media, not just polished advertisements."* This desire for authenticity extends to influencer endorsements as well. Several participants expressed scepticism towards overly promotional content, highlighting the importance of relevant and genuine influencer partnerships. *"Local influencers feel more relevant and trustworthy than international ones for example I can identify more with Chairman, our local guy than with Oprah Winfrey,"* shared one participant, suggesting that proximity and shared cultural context contribute to influencer credibility. This emphasis on authenticity is further supported by concerns raised about misleading promotions, highlighting the potential for negative repercussions when brands fail to maintain transparency. *"You can usually tell which influencers are genuinely excited about a product and which are just doing it for the money. The fake ones are easy to spot,"* observed one participant.

### **Peer Influence and Social Proof**

The importance of trust and authenticity is closely linked to the power of peer influence and social proof. Interviewees frequently cited instances where positive reviews, endorsements from friends, and user-generated content directly influenced their purchasing decisions. *"If a popular Masvingo personality like Vharazipi endorses a product on Facebook, everyone here in Masvingo starts talking about it. It can really boost sales,"* noted one participant, highlighting the amplified impact of local endorsements within the community. This aligns with the broader trend of consumers relying on recommendations from their social networks. *"Facebook groups are great for finding reviews and recommendations from people in Masvingo who have already bought the product,"* shared another. These findings underscore the importance of fostering positive word-of-mouth and encouraging user-generated content as part of a comprehensive social media strategy.

### **Emotional Connection with Brands**

Beyond trust and peer influence, participants also emphasised the importance of emotional connection with brands. They expressed that brands that shared related content, actively responded to comments, and ran interactive campaigns were more likely to foster emotional bonds. *"When a brand feels personal and responsive, I feel more loyal to it,"* explained one participant. This suggests that brands that prioritise engagement, personalisation, and two-way communication are better positioned to cultivate lasting customer relationships. *"I'm more likely to buy from a small business in Masvingo that I see actively engaging with the community online. It feels more personal,"* added another, demonstrating the importance of community connection for local businesses.

### **Platform-Specific Behaviour**

The interviews also revealed distinct patterns in how consumers use different social media platforms. WhatsApp emerged as a key tool for direct communication with vendors and seeking peer recommendations. *"I use WhatsApp to ask vendors about pricing and availability before I go to the shop. It saves me time and transport money,"* explained one participant. Instagram is primarily used for product discovery and visual inspiration. *"Instagram is where I go to see what's trending. I follow local boutiques and fashionistas for style inspiration,"* shared one interviewee. Facebook, on the other hand, is valued for community engagement and accessing product reviews. *"Facebook groups are great for finding reviews and recommendations from people in Masvingo who have already bought the product,"* noted a participant. These platform-specific behaviours underscore the need for brands to tailor their content and strategies to the unique functionalities and user demographics of each platform.

### **Local Context Dynamics**

Finally, the analysis highlighted unique aspects of Masvingo's digital consumer culture. A clear preference for hybrid shopping experiences (online research followed by physical purchase) emerged as a prominent theme. *"Internet shopping can be expensive, so I often research online but prefer to buy from a physical store in town where I can see the product for myself,"* explained one participant. This suggests that while social media plays a crucial role in awareness, information search, and even evaluation, the final purchase decision is often influenced by the opportunity to physically inspect the product. Price sensitivity is another important factor, driving consumers to engage in extensive online comparison shopping. *"I compare prices on several websites and even check with shops in Harare before making a big purchase. I want to make sure I'm getting the best deal,"* shared one interviewee.

## Discourse Analysis of Social Media Influence on Consumer Behaviour in Masvingo

Discourse analysis is a method examining how language constructs meaning and reflects power dynamics (Fairclough, 2013). It offers valuable insights into the influence of social media on Zimbabwean youth in Masvingo. By analysing the language, narratives, and themes emerging from both quantitative and qualitative data, the social and cultural forces at play can be understood.

### 1. Social Media is a Dominant Force

The quantitative data, revealing 85% daily social media usage among respondents, establishes social media as a pervasive force in their lives. Platforms such as Facebook, WhatsApp, and Instagram are not merely tools, but integrated aspects of daily routines. This aligns with the qualitative data, where participants describe social media as "*essential*," "*addictive*," and "*a part of who we are*," echoing global trends of social media's transformative impact (Kumar et al., 2020). This ubiquity positions social media as a powerful shaper of consumer behaviour.

However, the discourse also reveals a nuanced perception. While celebrated for convenience and accessibility, social media is also viewed with scepticism. Participants' comments such as, "*Sometimes the ads look too good to be true, and you end up disappointed*," highlight a tension between perceived benefits and the risk of misleading information. This duality reflects broader concerns about trust and authenticity in online spaces, demonstrating that while social media is influential, it's not uncritically accepted.

### 2. Peer Influence and Social Proof

The theme of peer influence is prominent. Qualitative data revealed language of "*trust*," "*recommendations*," and "*following the crowd*," showcasing how social connections drive consumer decisions. "*If my friends are using a product and posting about it, I feel like I should try it too*," one participant noted, illustrating the power of social validation. This aligns with the quantitative finding that 68% of respondents are influenced by social media ads and influencer recommendations. This combination suggests that youth rely on both direct peer experiences and social relationships with influencers for social proof (Cialdini, 2009). The discourse also emphasises user-generated content such as reviews and testimonials as crucial for building brand trust, further underscoring the importance of peer influence.

### 3. Critiques of Authenticity and Ethical Concerns: A Call for Transparency:

Despite the positive aspects, critiques of authenticity and ethical concerns emerged. Terms like "*fake*," "*misleading*," and "*too good to be true*" highlight scepticism about social media advertising. "*I bought a product because it looked very good on Instagram, but it was completely different when it arrived*," one participant shared. This scepticism underscores the importance of transparency and ethical practices. While social media is influential, youth are critical consumers who value honesty, echoing broader concerns about ethical digital marketing, especially in contexts with potentially less stringent regulation (Djafarova & Bowes, 2021).

### 4. Cultural and Contextual Nuances

The discourse reveals crucial cultural and economic context. References to economic hardship "*We don't have much money, so we have to be sure before we buy something*" highlight how economic realities shape consumer behaviour. The emphasis on community and collectivism demonstrates how social networks influence purchasing decisions, reflecting the importance of communal ties in Zimbabwean society. These contextual factors highlight the need for culturally sensitive social media strategies.

## Conclusion and Recommendations

This study highlighted the significant role of social media in shaping consumer behaviour and brand engagement among youth in Masvingo, Zimbabwe. The findings demonstrated that social media platforms were not only integral to the daily lives of young consumers but also served as powerful tools for influencing purchasing decisions and fostering brand loyalty. Trust, authenticity, peer influence, and emotional connections emerged as critical factors driving consumer behaviour, while platform-specific behaviours and local contextual dynamics further shaped engagement patterns. The study underscored the need for brands to adopt transparent, culturally sensitive, and interactive social media strategies to effectively connect with youth in emerging markets. By leveraging the insights from this research, businesses could better navigate the digital landscape and build meaningful relationships with their target audiences in Masvingo and similar contexts.

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